Ukrainians say Nato lags in technological arms race

KYIV: Ukrainian soldiers frowned as they pored over a small device plugged into a computer -- a drone interceptor captured from the Russian side.

The green device with a dome-shaped nose and 30-centimetre wingspan epitomises the technological arms race playing out between Kyiv and Moscow as their troops battle on the sprawling front line.

Deployed in their hundreds by both sides every day, drones have become the chief technology of the war, scouting out enemy positions and packed with explosives to crash down into soldiers, vehicles and equipment.

They have transformed the front line into a 15-kilometre (9-mile) deep kill-zone and overhauled the very strategy of modern warfare.

Ukraine first deployed drone interceptors in spring 2024, having judged them effective against the thousands of Russian Geran-2 attack drones that bombard Ukrainian cities and infrastructure every month.

The specimen showed that Moscow has now caught up.

"They copied our model," said Konstantin, the 27-year-old deputy commander of an anti-aircraft unit in Ukraine's 3rd Army Corps.

But Russia printed theirs from a single block of material, meaning it is "faster and cheaper to produce".

The 3D-printed interceptors, which race towards larger drones to take them out mid-air, have been a turning point in both the technology and economics of air defence.

US Patriot missiles, which Ukraine has and wants more of, cost about $3 million a shot.

Konstantin held up a Ukrainian drone interceptor that he said cost just $2,000 to make.

Such a price is more viable when facing hundreds of targets a day, and Ukraine's defence ministry has ordered their mass production.

But such is the pace of change that there are concerns about whether Ukraine's models are up to date.

Russian attack drones have recently shown signs of being able to evade interceptors by using AI-driven sensors.

"We need to adapt every month, sometimes even faster," Konstantin said. —AFP

UKRAINE's President Volodymyr Zelensky visits Anitkabir, the mausoleum of modern Turkiye's founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, in Ankara.—Reuters

Ukraine expected to give up land, some arms under US peace plan

LONDON: The United States has signalled to President Volodymyr Zelensky that Ukraine must accept a US-drafted framework to end the war with Russia that proposes Kyiv giving up territory and some weapons.

According to reliable sources, the proposals included cutting the size of Ukraine's armed forces, among other things.

Such a plan would represent a major setback for Kyiv as it faces further Russian territorial gains in eastern Ukraine and with Zelensky tackling a corruption scandal, which on Wednesday saw parliament dismiss the energy and justice ministers.

The White House declined to comment on the matter.

A Ukrainian official earlier said that Kyiv had received "signals" about a set of US proposals to end the war that Washington has discussed with Moscow. Ukraine has had no role in preparing the proposals, the source said.

Zelensky, who held talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara on Wednesday, is due to meet US Army officials in Kyiv on Thursday.

Signs of a renewed push by President Donald Trump's administration to end the war triggered the biggest jump in Ukraine's government bond prices in months.

No face-to-face talks have taken place between Kyiv and Moscow since a meeting in Istanbul in July and Russian forces have pressed on with Moscow's nearly four-year-old war in Ukraine, killing 25 people in strikes overnight.

No change in Russia's position

Efforts to revive peace negotiations appear to be gaining momentum, although Moscow has shown no sign of changing its terms for ending the war.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has long demanded Kyiv renounce plans to join the US-led Nato military alliance and withdraw its troops from four provinces Moscow claims as part of Russia.

Moscow has given no indication that it has dropped any of those demands and Ukraine says it will not accept them.

Russian forces control about 19 per cent of Ukrainian territory and are grinding forwards, while carrying out frequent attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure as winter approaches.

Land in exchange for security

Axios reported on Wednesday, citing a US official with direct knowledge of the matter, that the new US plan envisaged Ukraine granting Moscow part of eastern Ukraine it does not currently control in return for a US security guarantee for Kyiv and Europe against future Russian aggression.

A European diplomat, commenting on the purported new US proposals, said they could be another attempt by the Trump administration "to push Kyiv into a corner", but added there could be no solution that did not take into consideration Ukraine's position or that of Washington's European allies.

Another European diplomat said the suggestion that Ukraine cut its army seemed like a Russian demand rather than a serious proposal.

A US delegation, led by Army Secretary Dan Driscoll, is in Kyiv on a "fact-finding mission", the US embassy in Kyiv said. Army Chief Gen Randy George is in the delegation and he and Driscoll will meet Zelensky on Thursday.—Reuters

Nasa set to release new images of interstellar object

WASHINGTON: Nasa is set to release new images of an interstellar object called 3I/ATLAS that astronomers have determined is a comet probably even older than our solar system.

The object was first spotted in July by an Asteroid Terrestrial-impact Last Alert System, or ATLAS, telescope located in Rio Hurtado, Chile, and has been tracked by astronomers since then. Its unusual trajectory indicated that it was passing through our solar system from parts unknown.

Nasa said 3I/ATLAS poses no threat to Earth and will get no closer than about 275 million kilometres to our planet. 3I/ATLAS flew within 30m km of Mars last month.

Nasa officials intend to discuss 3I/ATLAS at a briefing in Greenbelt, Maryland, to release the new imagery from telescopes and spacecraft.

Astronomers have intensively studied 3I/ATLAS since it was first detected.

"This is a comet that formed in another solar system, most likely more than eight billion years ago - which means it is older than our solar system, and the oldest thing we've ever seen close up," University of Oxford astrophysicist Chris Lintott said.

Our solar system formed roughly 4.5 billion years ago.

3I/ATLAS is only the third interstellar object ever observed by astronomers travelling through the solar system. The others were objects called 1I/'Oumuamua, detected in 2017, and 2I/Borisov, discovered in 2019.

"So far, it seems to be made of the same sort of stuff we see for comets in our solar system - plenty of carbon dioxide and some water, carbon monoxide and other such molecules. We've also seen cyanide - normal for a comet - and lots of nickel, which is a bit surprising but not too unprecedented. We saw similar things in a previous interstellar comet, 2I/Borisov, and in some solar system comets," Lintott said.

3I/ATLAS is now on its way out of the solar system, according to University of Hawaii astronomer Larry Denneau, co-principal investigator for ATLAS. Its closest approach to the sun came last month, and its closest approach to the Earth will come in about a month.—Reuters

Merz's remark irks Lula

BERLIN: A remark by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz about Brazil that offended President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has been taken out of context, a German government spokesperson said on Wednesday.

Merz, at a trade congress last week, described asking journalists who had travelled with him to Brazil for the COP30 climate conference whether they wanted to remain in the country.

"Not one hand was raised. We were all glad to be back in Germany from that place," Merz told the audience.

The comment prompted Lula to remark at an event in northern Brazil on Tuesday that Merz should have gone dancing or to a bar while visiting the area around COP30 host city Belem earlier this month.

"Then he would have realised that Berlin doesn't offer him 10 per cent of the quality that the state of Para and the city of Belem offer," Lula said.—Reuters

UK says Russian ship shot lasers at its pilots

LONDON: The UK government warned the Kremlin on Wednesday after saying a Russian military ship had entered British waters and directed lasers at UK pilots.

Defence Secretary John Healey told reporters in London that the ship had "entered" UK waters for the second time this year, following an earlier incursion back in January.

"The Yantar is on the edge of UK waters, north of Scotland, having entered the UK's wider waters over the last few weeks," he said during a press conference in Downing Street.

The UK military deployed a Royal Navy frigate and Royal Air Force planes to "monitor and track this vessel's every move, during which the Yantar directed lasers at our pilots," he added. He called the use of the lasers "deeply dangerous" and issued a message to Russian President Vladimir Putin.—AFP

Bollywood battles paid reviews and fake sale claims

MUMBAI: India's $60-billion Bollywood industry is facing a deepening credibility crisis, as insiders warn that manipulated film reviews and inflated box office numbers are distorting public perception, ultimately hurting ticket sales.

Streaming platforms have disrupted traditional cinema, but industry veterans say Bollywood's woes are also self-inflicted — including the trend to declare a film a "hit" even before its release.

"If you don't engage these influencers and critics, they will write bad reviews, even if the film is good," producer-distributor Suniel Wadhwa said.

"If the film is bad, they will write good things about the film, provided the producer or studio has paid them." Trade analyst and veteran distributor Raj Bansal said audiences have grown sceptical of early rave reviews.

"As soon as the media gives four stars, people message me saying, 'Sir, that means the movie is not good,'" Bansal said.

"And, even if the film is good, they don't trust it." That distrust is now visible at the box office.

"Regular cinema-goers wait to know the correct reports," Bansal said.

That means ticket sales during the vital opening shows "take a major dip" as film fans wait for word of mouth or "genuine reviews" to come out, he added.

Industry insiders allege that some influencers have "rate cards", with prices rising for films that generate low pre-release buzz.

Producers, meanwhile, are accused of bulk-buying tickets to inflate opening-week numbers. "Everything is bought and manipulated," Bansal said, referring to both reviews and social media personalities.

'Bleak'

Sudhir Kasliwal, owner of Jaipur's Gem Cinema, recalled seeing hundreds of online bookings for one of superstar Shah Rukh Khan's releases, but only a fraction of the audience showed up in person.

"Producers, directors, and actors themselves buy tickets... the future of Bollywood looks very bleak if this practice continues," Kasliwal said.

"The wrong messages are conveyed to people, and unless good content is produced, things will never improve." Recent controversies include Bollywood A-lister Akshay Kumar's fighter jet action movie *Skyforce*.

The film's director denied allegations of so-called "block booking" to boost first-week numbers, but a Mumbai-based trade analyst claimed its gross was inflated from about $6 million to over $9 million.

"Online booking platforms showed full houses, but many theatres were nearly empty," the analyst said, requesting anonymity.

Bansal said that critics who refuse to play along also risk being sidelined, while those who comply "flourish".

"Whenever I post that the film has opened with weak collections (ticket sales), I receive a barrage of calls from actors, producers asking me to remove it," he said.

'Appetite to buy'

Producer-distributor Wadhwa said that the box office collection of the 2025 romantic comedy horror *Thamma* was also manipulated, claiming true sales were around $15 million while the film reported $18 million.

Thamma director Aditya Sarpotdar defended the $18 million figure, calling it the "most accurate", having come from distributors and exhibitors. —AFP

NEWSMAKERS

PARIS: A 'Marianne' bust, the symbol of the French Republic with a three-coloured scarf, at a congress of mayors. The event was organised by a mayors' association at the Paris Expo Porte de Versailles convention centre.—Reuters

MOSCOW: Russia's President Vladimir Putin visits an exhibition on artificial intelligence.—AFP

VILLAGERS look at a lava flow during the eruption of Mount Semeru in Indonesia's East Java region.—AFP

Volcano erupts near Bali, sending ash into the sky

SURABAYA: A volcano on Indonesia's main island of Java erupted on Wednesday, throwing ash and gas kilometres into the sky and forcing officials to raise the alert status to its highest level.

Mount Semeru in eastern Java, about 310 kilometres west of the tourist hotspot of Bali, erupted at 2:13 pm local time (0713 GMT), spewing what are known as pyroclastic flows, Indonesian geological agency head Muhammad Wafid said.

"The public is advised not to engage in activities within an 8-kilometre (5-mile) radius of the crater or peak of Mount Semeru due to the risk of being struck by ejected rocks," he said in a statement.

The local disaster agency said the plume of ash had risen as far as 8.5 kilometres into the air, although Wafid said thick fog blanketing the mountain had made measurements difficult.

The geological agency also said that seismic activity at Mount Semeru remained high.

There have been no immediate reports of evacuations or casualties caused by the eruption.

Authorities at Ngurah Rai airport in Bali said flight schedules were operating as usual so far.

An eruption by Semeru in 2021 killed more than 50 people and damaged more than 5,000 homes, forcing almost 10,000 people to seek refuge.

Indonesia sits on the Pacific "Ring of Fire", where the meeting of continental plates causes substantial volcanic and seismic activity.

The Southeast Asian archipelago has nearly 130 active volcanoes.—AFP

THE HAGUE: King Willem-Alexander (left) and Queen Maxima (right) of the Netherlands with Luxemburg's Grand Ducal couple Guillaume (second right) and Stephanie (second left) at the Huis ten Bosch Palace.—AFP

ADDIS ABABA: Artefacts returned to Ethiopia by Germany after 120 years, on display at Addis Ababa University.—Reuters